

"Known But to God": The Unverifiable Identities of *Disparus* in France, 1914-1924

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Introduction

On November 1, 1917, *l'Echo du Boqueteau* newspaper published a grisly piece of trench journalism. Their correspondent describes the discovery of soldiers' corpses—his comrades—once buried, now rising to the surface of the churned earth, refusing to be lost to memory. The living took the task of reburial seriously, disturbed by the naked remains: "For three years their scattered skulls grinned horribly through the young clover, and their bones, mixed with a few fragments of red capes and trousers, crumbled into dust near their rusty rifles."¹ No longer. A moonlight internment followed, the bones of the fallen laid to rest together, indistinguishable and forever anonymous.

Others felt more horror at this anonymity than at the prospect of disintegrating without ceremony in the open air. After discovering a humble roadside burial mound, a blank white cross honoring its occupant, another war correspondent wrote in *Le midi au front* in May 1916: "I thought of the dead man...I thought of his fate which perhaps would also be my fate...he fell here, an obscure craftsman of a great work, a little ripple which spread out and died when it reached an empty shore...and he was abandoned in the middle of the bare plain."² The anonymity of the buried man further isolated him, more so even than death. No one would take comfort from the knowledge of his sacrifice, heroic or futile. His body would not be repatriated, to be mourned and honored by his family. Hundreds of

¹Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War* (Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd., 1995), 79.

²Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, 84.

thousands of French soldiers suffered the same fate, bones scattered by violent bombardment, bodies disfigured and lost in the sucking mud of the pulverized earth, letters and identity plates destroyed or lost to history.

By the declaration of armistice on November 11th, 1918, France and the world had suffered the most destructive war in memory by human and structural measures. Accepted contemporary figures place the number of total military casualties at roughly 9 million; the common figure of civilian casualties is 6.5 million. In France alone, about 1.1 million men died in battle or of injuries and subsequent illness. 225,000 remain missing, presumed dead.³ No previous conflict had produced the mass death, or the mass disappearances, that characterized this first modern war.

Growing population consciousness, combined with the extraordinary losses suffered throughout the world, created a great need for statistical analysis of casualties. This analysis would provide politicians and the remaining population in general with a sense of mastery, of understanding; collecting and presenting the minutiae of information of each death and mutilation would cut the inhuman scale of the war to workable, practical, and understandable mathematical equations of input and output, informing reparations, rebuilding, allocations, social support programs, and grave official mass ceremonies of mourning. Frantic tabulations of the war dead and injured were complicated by the missing, presumed dead—men who had variously died anonymously, were buried before identification, or who ended up in foreign prison camps and hospitals unbeknownst to their comrades.

³This commonly cited figure—225,000 missing in action—comes from a report published in 1927. Later historical studies have suggested figures as high as 500,000.

How could the missing be appropriately counted, slotted into the right categories of imprisoned or dead? The very nature of their disappearances confounded attempts to quantify, explain, categorize. These men became sources of further numerical errors, gumming up the smooth bureaucratic structure built to enumerate prisoners of war and the injured, and to subsidize war widows and orphaned children. The unknowable fate of the *disparus* became a site of national obsession, a final frontier of informational and emotional closure that would never be conquered.

Since Montesquieu's estimation that France's population had declined, by the fault of its government, since the time of Charlemagne in his 1748 text *De l'esprit des lois*, French theorists and politicians attributed depopulation not to defects in nature or public health, but to political missteps and failed public policy. The numerical strength of France's population was assumed to be an accurate measure of its government's success.⁴ Accordingly, the mass casualties suffered during the *grande guerre* destabilized patriotic sentiment regarding the conflict. On the wrong end of the war, what had seemed a worthy and honorable fight resembled more the senseless massacre of a charnel house.

Beyond the civilizing project of studying and organizing France's population statistically, discovering the ultimate fate of the *disparus*, and providing fast, sensible solutions for their families, was a measure of French ability to conquer the unknown, of French technology to provide answers, and of French law to maintain

⁴Historian Joshua Cole describes this understanding: "The measure of good government became its ability to analyze risk and reduce the uncertainty and dangers of daily existence at home, in the workplace, and in the public spaces of the city and countryside." Joshua Cole, *The Power of Large Numbers: Population, Politics, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 10.

authority in the wake of unimaginable destruction and grief. This governmental anxiety mirrored the individual anxiety of the relatives of the unlucky *disparus*. Tortured by lack of contact and information, some maintained desperate fantasies that their husbands and sons were merely unable to write, or comfortably recovering in a foreign hospital. Others, for years certain of their men's deaths, sought legal closure in order to claim pensions, remarry, or otherwise move on with their lives. Families pushed for legal solutions that could bridge the gully of the unknown, even if forgoing proper evidence was necessary to declare missing men dead. Some formed *associations* to discover, through international investigations, as much information as possible in an effort to know of the missing's final moments. However, where their governments sought numerical answers, what families desired most was the psychic closure only attainable with the return of the remains of the dead. In this light, the thousands of anonymous burials are even more tragic.



The *grande guerre* of 1914-1918 has enjoyed new attention in recent years. The centennial of the war in 2014 occasioned countless articles, books, exhibitions, reenactments and ceremonies, commemorating the war and celebrating the hundred years of scholarship it inspired. Archives have been dusted off, unsealed, digitized and presented for viewing. The air of renewed vitality surrounding this conflict is exciting. However, most new considerations of the war seek to overturn long-held convictions, retool dominant narratives, or apply more contemporary political frameworks to facts and stories considered accepted if not stale. The causes of the war, where fault lies, reconstructions of trench conditions, and implications

for the interwar period and the rise of fascism are among the tropes of contemporary historical debates. This history is a well-trodden ground, a collection of familiar narratives that have been re-filtered, reconsidered, and colored by a thousand interpretations.

My contribution to this body of knowledge is in reorienting this now standard approach to one that focuses on highlighting disjunctions and introducing new sources that reveal gaps in our understanding. The story of the *disparus* presented in this thesis is just one rich history that remains largely unconsidered. It follows that countless more worthy and important sources await serious study that will add dimension and texture to the already enormous body of work on the war. History is a plastic and unfinished narrative that can and should be shifted and changed as new information and new frameworks come to light. This essay does not simply demonstrate what other omissions might exist in our knowledge or understanding of the war. Rather, this thesis also seeks to foreground the French national obsession with the *disparus*. These unfortunates became a lightning rod for bureaucratic projects, strange legal maneuverings, and familial despair. I contend that attempts to fill the gaps in knowledge presented by *disparus*, by the military, the government, and families, represent a reaction to a fundamental national trauma: to quantify and analyze, to tie up loose ends, to acquire evidence, when faced with the great social abyss that resulted from the mass death of World War I.

Chapter I describes the technologies of identification, and according military procedures, developed to mitigate misidentifications and anonymous deaths at the site of disappearance itself, the trench. Here, the bodies themselves as evidence

were still present, and identifying them was a vital project worth putting living soldiers at risk. In Chapter II, I examine legal solutions developed during the war to help those once removed from the trenches: the families of the *disparus*, who, lacking the physical evidence of the body, sought judicial aid in determining if the missing could safely be considered dead, in order to claim pensions, remarry, or otherwise gain economic and social stability. In the final chapter, I present the architectures of information and investigation created after the war to research the last known status and condition of the *disparus*, long after any evidence was likely to be found. This last, furthest removed structure was an intellectual and emotional lifeline for desperate families unwilling to accept that their missing men were simply lost to obscurity.

The French government's unsuccessful attempts to devise rational policy solutions to the fundamentally unsolvable metaphysical problem of the *disparus* lay bare the strange assumption that the war was under bureaucratic control. This conflict between modern states, with recognizable stakes, and conducted with the most advanced technology of the era, was not a rational event, set in motion with grave understanding and authority. Rather, its uncontrollable nature was obscured by the appearance of political and structural limits. The war began with international declarations, ended with international treaties, and was cleaned up with reparations, social programs and ceremonies. Failed attempts to put the *disparus* neatly within a narrative—whether by declaring them dead in absentia, documenting their last moments, or making monuments to their unknown sacrifices—show a fundamental truth of modern war-making: there is a

bureaucratic way to start a war, but no bureaucratic way to end one. The *disparus* prevent true closure from being reached; by their nature, they cannot be accounted for, and therefore cannot be explained.

Historiography

The nature of my research topic presented a logistical problem at the outset. The absence of information or even oblique references to *disparus* from almost all secondary historical sources I consulted was frustrating. The initial idea behind this thesis came from a recently unearthed archive, that of the Abbé Collé, currently exhibited at the Médiathèque de Barcelonnette in the South of France. Despite my inability to access the Abbé's documents, and the paucity of secondary narratives regarding the *disparus*, this first inspiration has ensured that my work stayed close to the primary texts. The great majority of my sources come from the digital archives of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF), known as Gallica. This thesis would have been impossible without the essential texts preserved here. I also consulted the archives of the Bibliothèque Numérique de Roubaix, and of the Comité International de la Croix-Rouge, the latter of which was incredibly useful though the majority of its sources remain inaccessible in Geneva.

The legal texts of Dr. Phillipe Fougerol, a lawyer and scholar who published extensive tracts on the rights of war widows, and of law student Jacques Lecoq, who himself wrote a thesis on legal treatment of the *disparus*, are both preserved at the Arthur W. Diamond Law Library at Columbia. Their work was indispensable to this project, providing measured and detailed analysis of the history of French law regarding missing persons and their effects, and regarding the rights of war widows and their children. Information about processes of identification and relevant bureaucratic structures was found in anthologies published by government

ministries throughout the war, which often included useful, commentary, speeches, and images.

Perhaps the most significant primary source influencing my work was the war diary of Corporal Louis Barthas, whose extensive, expressive writing has deeply influenced French war history since its publication in 1978. Corporal Barthas' first-person accounts of episodes of identification, misidentification, and burial provided the front-line counterpoint to the testimonies of searching families. His sensitive interpretation of the events he experienced greatly influenced the direction of my research. Other diaries, such as that of Jane Catulle-Mendès, gave emotional and spiritual weight to the numbing lists of names published in the *gazettes* preserved at the BNF.

Broadly, secondary sources I consulted discussed population dynamics from the 1870s to the interwar period, described war technology and strategy, summarized major battles and political struggles, and illuminated conditions at the home front. Others more specifically focused on combat psychology, nationalism, and processes of mourning. This literature provided a contextual landscape for my particular study of *disparus*. French historian Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau is the only historian I have found who has properly considered the importance of the problems presented by the *disparus*. Audoin-Rouzeau's work sheds light on my subject in his book *Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France During the First World War*, which compiles hundreds of otherwise inaccessible first-person testimonies from the front. Audoin-Rouzeau's concern for airing unheard sources influenced not only the content of my thesis, but also the manner in

which it was written. More importantly, his deep engagement with processes of grief and the importance of evidence of death in his article “Corps perdus, corps retrouvées: trois exemples de deuils de guerre” shaped my analysis of both laws regarding the *disparus*, and of the great lengths families went to in order to find closure. Audoin-Rouzeau’s sympathy for the individual sufferings of soldiers and families during the war was refreshing in contrast to the patriotic generalizations of historians like Leonard V. Smith, who present the war dead as a collective sacrifice to the *patrie*. I hope my work reflects Audoin-Rouzeau’s humanism and respect for the dead.

Additional secondary sources that I consider integral to this project include Jean-Yves Le Naour’s text *The Living Unknown Soldier: A Story of Grief and the Great War*, which nuanced my understanding of national grief and investigation of deaths, and opened broader lines of inquiry. Le Naour’s text is the only English-language source I consulted that even mentioned the *disparus* as more than a statistical footnote. Michael Lanthier’s *War Widows and the Expansion of the French Welfare State* made sense of the many disparate and sometimes contradictory histories written about war pensions and other entitlements.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the impassioned debates happening in French online historical forums like La Grande Guerre at cultureforums.net, which sent me looking for certain referenced texts and provided images of *plaques d’identité*, which are relatively rare.

Chapter I

Plaques d'identité and their shortcomings

Jealously citing the semi-standardized “parchment cards” carried by Federal soldiers during the American Revolution, a Doctor-Major Schneider exhorted the importance of developing a new identification system at a conference after the Franco-Prussian War; during the Siege of Paris by Prussian forces in 1870, officers had to “hastily sew bits of canvas with [identification] information on the inside of their soldiers’ greatcoats.”⁵ Technologies of identification within the French army needed to evolve in reaction to the growing number of dead and disappeared that came with modern warfare. Traditional identification papers remained the de facto method of ensuring that dead soldiers’ names would remain with their bodies from before the Franco-Prussian war through the early 1880s.⁶ However, no consensus existed on what kind of papers a soldier should carry, or what governing body exactly should issue them. To head off the foreseeable problem of masses of unidentified dead, technologies of identification needed to catch up to technologies of destruction.

⁵M. Schneider le medecin-major, “Assainissement des champs de bataille,” *Congrès international des oeuvres d'assistance en temps de guerre, 17-20 July 1889, Paris*, (Paris: Librairie L. Baudoin et Librairie J-B Ballière, 1889). Note: I personally translated all citations from French sources in this thesis, unless otherwise noted in the bibliography.

⁶Some French and Belgian soldiers, concerned about their bodies being unidentifiable, or perhaps out of regimentary pride, had their conscription numbers tattooed. Among sailors, the practice was more common, even in the upper ranks: “[Gambier] Bolton insisted that ‘many officers and men’ stationed in Burma were tattooed by Burmese methods. Lord ‘Bob’ Roberts, for example, was said to have developed an enthusiasm for tattooing during his service in Burma. From that time, he encouraged the practice among his officers, asserting that the tattooing of regimental crests not only aided the identification of the dead on the battlefield (tragically realized for Roberts when his own son died in the Boer War with a regimental crest meticulously reproduced on his arm by Macdonald), but also encouraged a suitably martial *esprit de corps*.” James Bradley, “Body Commodification? Class and Tattoos in Victorian Britain,” *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, Ed. Jane Caplan (London : Reaktion Books, 2000), 144-145.

Doctor-Major Schneider heartily endorsed a new system devised to end identificatory uncertainty: identification plates, which were first adopted in the early 1880s. A soldier was given a metal tag (or *plaque d'identité*) to be stamped with his name, date of induction, and registration number, which according to regulations, was to be worn securely around the neck at all times.⁷ A military circular disseminated on September 2, 1881 outlined the new technology:

With the goal of allowing the recognition of men killed or gravely injured, all of the military is to be equipped in time of war with a medallion known as an *identification plate* [*plaque d'identité*]. This plate in nickel silver, in the form of an oval⁸

A later circular gave a more detailed description:

The plates are on cords of black cotton. On the *recto* is to be stamped the soldier's surname, first name, and the class to which he belongs [year of entry into service]; on the *verso* is to be stamped the subdivision of the region and the identification number given to the soldier at recruitment.⁹

In the event of a soldier's death, the tag would be collected as evidence by his compatriots and delivered to a commanding officer, and eventually to its bearer's hometown, where the local government would issue a death certificate to the family.¹⁰ This simple and elegant system worked in theory; however, the messy and disordered reality of the trenches of the Great War complicated tag identification and often rendered it useless. Even viscerally close to the evidence of death, attempts to rationalize postmortem identification failed in face of the incredible

⁷Jean-Yves Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier: A Story of Grief and the Great War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 39.

⁸Bureau de l'habillement, *De la décision ministérielle attribuant aux hommes de troupe une plaque dite plaque d'identité*, (Librairie militaire: Journal militaire officiel, partie réglementaire, No. 44, 1883), 173.

⁹Service de santé en campagne, *Notice No. 2*. (Revue d'artillerie, No. 15, 12 Octobre 1883).

¹⁰Jean-Yves Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier*, 40.

number of soldiers killed, and the chaos of front-line bombardment. Soldiers would collect the tags of comrades and then fall themselves to enemy fire, becoming the bearers of multiple identities; tags would be stuffed into pockets, wallets, or wrapped loosely around wrists, sinking into mud or destroyed in battle. If possible, the tags or any other identifying detritus were retrieved days or weeks later, when decomposition, weather, or further bombardment made the task gruesome and difficult.

Corporal Louis Barthas, a French conscript, writes in his war diary of the physical and psychological horror of disinterment duty. Soldiers were taken off the front lines for work detail:

They sent us to take twenty-four hours of so-called rest in the front-line trench, and what rest! Work details, all day long, and at night the company got orders to bury the dead who lay between the lines since the assaults of September 25-26. The dead men were divided into lots, and we drew for them by squad. For the 13th Squad I drew a lucky hand. We only had six corpses to get rid of, and they were very close to the trench.¹¹

Makeshift graves quickly mucked out were the final homes for cadavers, after they were frisked for identification:

We got the work done quickly. You pushed the cadaver into a shell hole, tossed a few shovelfuls of earth on top, and on to the next one. As corporal I had to take off each one's identity tag. Some had it on their wrists, others hanging around their necks, or in a pocket—what a chore! To dig through a dead man's pockets, pat him down, and with a knife or scissors cut the cord or chain which held the identity tag.

This task was difficult for the soldiers, not only for its physical strain and the danger of exposure on the battlefield, but also for its metaphysical or spiritual strangeness:

¹¹Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker, 1914-1918*, Trans. Edward M. Strauss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 121.

It seemed like a profanation to us, and we spoke in whispers as if we were afraid of waking them up.

Even so, Barthas notes that his lucky draw saved him and his men from the worst internment duty:

The squad that had to take care of the corpses in the *boyau*¹² itself, the ones we had been tramping over for three days, took all night to accomplish its lugubrious task, digging out the half-crushed, broken, collapsed bodies, mixed in with dirt, musette bags, knapsacks, which for many formed a single, blood-soaked, muddy mass.¹³

Barthas paints a vivid scene: exhausted soldiers, coming off a grueling work detail, forced to struggle in wet, bombed out trenches through the night, their cold hands rummaging in the clothing of decomposing cadavers, searching for an elusive metal tag. He admits the clear shortcomings of the gravedigging detail:

Another night we welcomed two stretcher-bearers who carried a written order to identify and bury the bodies which were between the lines. To carry out a task which required several teams, they sent two men trembling with fear at each shell blast which shook the shelter. Several times they tried to go out into the dark night, the rain, the fog, but each time they stumbled back precipitously, and finally they decided that they had buried as many of them as they could. Bah, as Bismarck had said, refusing a ceasefire request to bury the dead the evening after the battle of Champigny. "The dead are as well off on top of the ground as underneath it."¹⁴

Barthas here hints to the probable truth of the identification process developed by the military: many bodies on the front lines went entirely unidentified, what for

¹²"gut" or "tube" in French, a slang word for the trenches.

¹³Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker, 1914-1918*, 121.

¹⁴Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker, 1914-1918*, 283.

being lost in the mud, bombed beyond recognition, or ignored willfully or accidentally by the exhausted graveyard detail.¹⁵

All of the effort and uncertainty was further useless when, as was often the case, soldiers didn't wear their ID plates in the first place. A November 1916 *Bulletin des armées de la République* included a plea from the Minister of War that his officers would adhere strictly to the various circulars describing ID plates, including that each soldier was issued an individual cord on which to keep it.¹⁶ Despite the best intentions of the surviving soldiers, the arduous and dangerous task of identifying fallen comrades was a ramshackle effort. Further incidents of cadavers being ignored, lost, or of identification squads losing their nerve pepper Barthas' extensive diaries from 1914 through the end of the war.

Two entries are particularly demonstrative of the unreliability of corpse identification on the front lines. In the first, Barthas relates how he dug up a "boiled, shriveled head and a *képi*" that almost certainly belonged to his friend Mondières, where the unfortunate had been holed up before a bomb filled the entire trench.¹⁷ Barthas and his comrades planted a rudimentary cross and an upturned bottle, with a ribbon of paper stating the dead man's name, over his resting spot. But Barthas acknowledges: "we knew that a couple of shells landing nearby would soon make an

¹⁵The likelihood that any ground soldiers occupied near the front held innumerable unidentified corpses was great. Seeing a group of soldiers digging near him, Barthas asked what they were doing. The response: " 'Can't you see that we're burying the dead from the last assault?' a rough voice answered. This response made me shiver with fear, to think that there were dead men all around me, and they were being buried under just a couple shovelfuls of dirt." Louis Barthas. *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker, 1914-1918*. 23.

¹⁶"LES PLAQUES D'IDENTITÉ," *Bulletin des Armées de la République* (Nov 22 1916), 15.

¹⁷A *képi* was a hat worn by soldiers during the war.

end of it, and the name Mondières would live on only in our memories.”¹⁸ The basic identity of Mondières was attached to his head by the “distinctive” shape of his *képi*; simply enough, the man is presumed dead. In most cases Barthas would be safe in this assumption.

On the other hand, the incident of Laboucarié’s misidentification, perhaps intended to be humorous, demonstrates how impossible it was to account for the living and the dead, and to keep them in the right categories, even when the physical evidence was at hand. Barthas relates discovering a knapsack in the muck after a bombardment: “we opened the haversack. Perhaps we would discover the name of its owner. Indeed, it contained a pile of postcards and letters, all in the name of Laboucarié. What? Laboucarié was dead? The poor bastard! Everyone in the regiment knew him...” Laboucarié’s loss was deeply felt in the regiment; he was a character, known for eccentricities like wearing colorful clothing and writing bawdy songs. Dutifully, Barthas goes to report the death to the sergeant-major of Laboucarié’s regiment. Surprise of surprises:

At this very moment, Laboucarié was in the bloom of health, as much as one could be in the trenches. When questioned, the walking corpse...was forced to admit that he had abandoned the trench after a violent bombardment. That was all it took for him to be sent up for a court-martial. From that day on Laboucarié had it in for me.¹⁹

The unknown dead—the truly *disparus*—were certainly more common than the deserters, but it is impossible to know exactly how many men, like Laboucarié, were presumed dead and never came up for court martial, or how many men, like

¹⁸Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker, 1914-1918*, 88.

¹⁹Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker, 1914-1918*, 92.

Mondiès, were simply lost to obscurity.²⁰ The difficulty of pinning identities to bodies, and the danger of making false assumptions from available evidence, frustrated the military's attempts to keep accurate records of the living, dead, missing, and imprisoned. Acknowledging the impossibility of definitively identifying remains, Aristide Briand, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, wrote in a letter to the Deputy of Seine-et-Oise:

In what concerns mortally injured soldiers inside the French lines or those who remain in the hands of our troops...we must take into account that too often, the remains of missing soldiers in these conditions are mutilated, disfigured, or dispersed to the point of being impossible to identify, and thus do not permit military authorities give families the relief from anxiety that comes with the certainty of mourning.²¹

Briand further expresses how this uncertainty and anxiety may be even worse if the soldier falls in enemy territory; if taken by foreign ambulance to a hospital, or captured and brought into occupied Belgium or elsewhere, the prisoner seems as likely as not to have his name end up on the prisoners list delivered from one government to the other. Many *disparus* were simply unfortunate in that their remains were on the wrong side of the French lines. Others were even more unlucky, in that their state of imprisonment prevented them from communicating their status, sometimes for years, despite the rule of war that allowed prisoners to

²⁰Still other men, though living, were unidentifiable though they did not desert. Barthas struggled to recognize a mutilated comrade: "Meanwhile someone recognized this soldier: 'It's Gachet. He's from Corporal Barthas' squad.' The wounded man affirmed with a nod of his head that indeed he was Gachet. I hadn't recognized a man from my own squad. But would his own mother herself have recognized him, like that?" Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelnmaker, 1914-1918*, 44.

²¹Aristide Briand, "Réponse de M. Briand, ministre des affaires étrangères à M. Prat, député de Seine-et-Oise. L'Eclair de Paris, 9 Decembre 1915," *Journal de droit international* (6.1-4, 1916), 116.

write four cards and two letters per month to be delivered home. Clearly, much of this correspondence was never written or sent.²²

The early years of the war brought great casualties; military strategists, doctors, and criminologists alike struggled to develop more reliable methods to keep pace with the extraordinary number of unidentified bodies, which were sometimes annihilated so completely by new weaponry that retrieving limbs, let alone intact and legible tags or papers, was impossible. The logistical difficulty of implementing new technology essentially barred any advancement of identification techniques. This did not prevent the publishing of strange and sometimes fanciful prescriptions for more reliable identification.

Enchanted by French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon's system of *signalement anthropométrique*, two American anthropologists, Dr. Harris Hawthorne and Brent Wentworth, tasked their farsighted imaginations with solving the very current problem of "enormous heaps of mutilated slain, where identity is considered hopeless."²³ Their 1918 manual, *Personal Identification: Methods for the Identification of Individuals, Living or Dead* primarily sticks to the mundane and minute science of measuring features and recognizing subtle traits forwarded by Bertillon, now considered little more than elaborate pseudoscience. Bertillon's perceived success in eliminating misidentifications among living criminals could be theirs in the realm of the dead soldier. Hawthorne and Wentworth discard papers,

²²Aristide Briand, "Réponse de M. Briand, ministre des affaires étrangères à M. Prat, député de Seine-et-Oise. L'Eclair de Paris, 9 Decembre 1915," 117-118.

²³Harris Hawthorne Wilder, Ph.D. and Brent Wentworth, *Personal Identification : Methods for the Identification of Individuals, Living or Dead* (Boston : Richard G. Badger/The Gorham Press, 1918), 18.

tattooing, identity tags and sight identification—all these methods being inexact, besides being insufficient when a corpse is mutilated or decomposed. Instead, they propose that fingerprinting, already standard in the United States military at the time of enlisting, should be expanded internationally. Even better, full palm- and footprints should be taken, as those ridges are also unique to individuals:

Naturally in such a war as the present one, or in some phases of the one just mentioned [the Franco-Prussian War], any search of the field, or any long examination of the bodies would be quite impossible, but, granting the opportunity, which does sometimes occur, even in the case cited by Bismarck, certain of the parts missing from the remains seen by him might be found on the field, and properly identified.

Perhaps extremities could be preserved at the front lines and identified later:

It would even be possible, where all chance of studying such remains fails, to collect from bodies a given finger, perhaps the right thumb, and identify these far in the rear, where the opportunity to do so would be given. These positively identifiable parts, in an extremity, could be collected into vats of alcohol or formalin, for identification at some later time, even after the close of war, when the legal importance of proving death would, in the case of some individuals, be of sufficient importance to far more than repay the small expenditure for this work.²⁴

The scientists' strange proposal is gruesome, perhaps even flippant, considering the great trial soldiers like Barthas underwent at each disinterment duty. Finding bodies was itself nearly impossible; tasking soldiers with finding a specific finger, detaching it, and safekeeping it in a pouch or pocket until it could be preserved with hundreds of others in formalin and compared against thousands of prints by some poor soul at the home front after the war, approaches the limits of bureaucratic

²⁴Harris Hawthorne Wilder, Ph.D. and Brent Wentworth, *Personal Identification : Methods for the Identification of Individuals, Living or Dead*, 364.

absurdity. This suggestion is only surpassed by a later inspiration: if palm- and soleprints were taken, why not preserve the entire hand or foot? They write:

If a record were made incomplete, and included as well the record of the palms and the soles, an identification could be made from a detached hand or foot. In this connection sole-print [sic] records would be of especial [sic] use, since a heavy leather shoe would often afford the necessary protecting to a foot to allow a perfect and complete identification.²⁵

Hawthorne and Wentworth's suggestions are implausible, reflecting their unfamiliarity with the true costs, financial and human, of the war abroad. However, they sensed the same problem as the French.

Leaving masses of soldiers unidentified was no longer acceptable as it had been in Bismarck's time; as technology had evolved to more effectively wage war, technology must evolve to more accurately identify the killed. The matter was pressing for psychological reasons, and for political reasons; how could a nation grieve, declare victory, or ensure its civilizing mastery if thousands of men died unknown?²⁶ The military's unsuccessful attempts to maintain the identities of soldiers, both living and dead, soon became the government's problem. Social services and war commemorations were disrupted by faulty and incomplete information. For citizens, however, grief and uncertainty warred with a more banal phenomenon: women couldn't claim insurance or pensions for themselves or their children, or remarry, without legal documentation of their husbands' deaths. In France, the problem of declaring a man dead *in absentia* would take years to be

²⁵Harris Hawthorne Wilder, Ph.D. and Brent Wentworth, *Personal Identification : Methods for the Identification of Individuals, Living or Dead*, 364.

²⁶Wentworth and Hawthorne aptly describe effective bodily identification as "one of the great necessities of civilization," 5.

unknotted, leaving many women and their families in difficulty, and the status of many *disparus* in question, long after the war's end.

Chapter II

Death as a bureaucratic state: legal solutions to the problem of the *disparus*

The mounting numbers of unidentified soldiers killed in battle quickly became more than a theoretical problem for military and government administrators: on the home front, grief-stricken and financially unstable families were desperate for news, closure, remains to bury, and pensions to spend. The spiritual and economic uncertainty caused by the estimated 225,000-540,000 missing French soldiers, presumed imprisoned or more likely dead, presented an urgent need for legal answers that would allow families to continue their lives.²⁷ For the government itself, a judicial process to expediently declare the missing dead would allow hundreds of thousands of investigations to be closed, and would create a great sense of closure and control over the incomplete and inaccurate information arriving daily at ministry offices describing the war dead, wounded, missing, and imprisoned.

Most of the reasons that it was imperative that *poilus* could be declared dead *in absentia* involved the general system of allocations and posthumous benefits paid to their wives and children. Despite the intervening Franco-Prussian War, in 1914 military widows' pensions were still governed by an 1831 law, outdated though considered generous in the wake of the 1919 decree that replaced it. A widow of a rank-and-file infantryman killed on the field of battle could expect 800 francs per

²⁷A 1927 French estimate of soldiers missing in action or presumed dead numbers at 225,300; a later U.S. War Department estimate nearly doubles that number, including prisoners unaccounted for, at 537,000 men.

year, with 300 extra francs accorded for each child under 18.²⁸ The historian Michael Lanthier puts this amount in context, demonstrating the meager living widows could expect:

A day laborer was estimated to make an average of 7,000 francs a year in Paris or 4,700 francs in the provinces in 1921... in 1920, a kilogram of bread cost roughly one franc, a liter of milk cost a little less, and a kilogram of butter or beefsteak cost around fifteen francs. A war widow's daily budget was just over two francs, which means that if she bought a kilogram of bread, she would have had a little more than a franc left for purchasing other food or clothing, or paying for heating, miscellaneous expenses, and rent.²⁹

Lanthier correctly supposes that even before considering the “rampant” inflation of the post-war franc, entitled widows would be unable to support themselves and their families on military pensions alone. This insufficiency was mooted by the fact that few military pensions were given out under the 1831 decree; most pensions weren’t dispensed until after the new legislation went into effect. Pressed for income, women whose husbands had died in battle often quickly remarried. An estimated 680,000 women were widowed by the war; only 266,000 women were listed “widowed” in the 1921 census.³⁰ Remarriage was a popular option for war widows, who could retain the pensions from their previous marriages while enjoying the support of a new husband, thanks to the passionate lobbying of widows’ associations.

²⁸Michael Lanthier, “War Widows and the Expansion of the French Welfare State,” *Proceedings of The Western Society of French History* (vol. 31, 2003), 257.

²⁹Michael Lanthier, “War Widows and the Expansion of the French Welfare State,” 259.

³⁰Michael Lanthier, “War Widows and the Expansion of the French Welfare State,” 257.

The few avenues of recourse many widows used—pensions and remarriage, and declaring their children Wards of the Nation³¹—were unavailable to wives of unidentified or missing soldiers. In general, widows had a difficult lot; pension rates lagged behind inflation adjustments that devalued every franc they received, and suffragist movements that would allow them to gain more control as heads of families failed unilaterally. However, widows of men who had disappeared, rather than simply died in battle, were at a significant disadvantage. In order for a woman to claim a pension or legally remarry, bureaucrats required definitive, documented proof of death. A standard request for pensions required, among other documents:

- (1) death certificate of husband
- (2) rank and status of husband's military service, available at the office of the husband's regiment
- (3) attestation to the manner of death, to be provided by the office of the husband's regiment, and perhaps concerning the state of the husband's military service (1). This attestation may be replaced by a notice of death sent by the Mayor's office or by the military authority, if the document bears the distinction "Killed by the enemy or dead of injuries sustained in the War."³²

Obviously, women still waiting for news of their husbands would not be able to provide documentation of their deaths. Legal solutions were needed desperately to improve the emotional and financial solvency of families of *disparus*. Jacques Lecoq, a law student writing for his *doctorat* at the University of Paris in 1921, outlined the importance of laws to determine death in the absence of identifiable remains:

³¹Widows could apply to have their children "adopted" as *pupilles de la Nation*, entitling them to extra pensions for the "upkeep" of children while retaining their legal rights as custodians. Despite speeches by Maurice Barrés and others suggesting these "subventions" were meant to buttress the elite by maintaining the education of bourgeois children, in practice only lower class women applied for the adoption. Michael Lanthier, "War Widows and the Expansion of the French Welfare State," 264.

³²France, Ministère De La Guerre, Service Général Des Pensions, *Pensions Des Veuves Et Orphelins De Militaires Décédés à La Guerre* (Paris: *Patrimoine En Images*. Bibliothèque Numérique De Roubaix).

Still this uncertainty troubles the wives of missing soldiers, because life has taken them back in its courses; they want to live, to build new homes, but are heartbroken to be prevented from doing so, despite the near-certainty of their husbands' deaths...it was important to put an end, in legal terms, to this state of uncertainty that so damaged the rights of the spouses, the children, the heirs and other beneficiaries of the dead.³³

Despite the need recognized by Lecoq and others, the political and social risks of declaring missing veterans dead plagued legal debates in unexpected ways. The daily sufferings of thousands of wives and children continued for years while lawyers and bureaucrats tackled the paradoxical problem of proving death in the absence of proof—in the absence of physical remains, or eyewitness testimony.

The first modern laws describing legal and financial procedures in the event of a man's (or a soldier's) disappearance, passed after Napoleon's unsuccessful Russian campaign during the First Empire, were exhaustive and complex.³⁴ Most pressing was the problem of how and when it was appropriate to sell an "absent" man's home, personal effects and valuables; ownership of property, rather than definitive proof of life and death, was the primary concern of the packet of laws, the law of 13 January 1817 most notable among them. Numerous suits decided in local courts further addressed the problems of property and inheritance raised by the 1817 law.³⁵ The procedure to obtain a declaration of absence could take up to 30 years, which demonstrated to legal experts facing the *grande guerre* that their laws were insufficient in face of hundreds of thousands of men caught in the liminal state

³³Jacques Lecoq, "De La Constataion Du Décès Des Disparus," (Thesis, Université De Paris- Faculté De Droit, 1921), 7-8.

³⁴Louis-Joseph-Gabriel de Chénier, *Guide des tribunaux militaires, ou Législation criminelle de l'armée* (Paris: Anselin, 1838).

³⁵Louis-Joseph-Gabriel de Chénier, *Guide des tribunaux militaires, ou Législation criminelle de l'armée*, 807-809.

of *inconnu, non identifié*, and their widows, who were similarly stuck in an unacceptable legal purgatory. Law student Jacques Lecoq wrote of the 1817 law's inadequacy:

Article 5 of the law only allowed proof of death by witnesses and the declaration of death by administrative judgment in cases where it was proven that there were no state registers of civil status, or that they were lost, destroyed in whole or in part or that their maintenance was interrupted. This proof of death could be made, once the absence of state registers was established, on presumptions, though on the condition that they were well-founded, precise, and corresponded to known information.³⁶

While article 5 allowed for witness testimony to determine a man's death, the organizational and bureaucratic burden of proving that documents establishing death definitively did not exist, or were destroyed, lost, or otherwise misplaced, was too heavy considering the mass numbers of missing and the uncertainty of departmental records in stressed, understaffed or even occupied territories.

Louis Nail, Minister of Justice from 1917-1920, similarly decried the unsuitability of the 1817 law to the circumstances of modern war:

The complex and dated procedure to determine absence regulated by title 4 of the 1st book of the civil code is no longer justified when the person's absence is related to operations of war. It is for this motive that the law of 13 January 1817...already in 1870-1871 contained significant modifications to the common law regarding absence with the intention to simplify procedures and reduce delays.³⁷

The high burden of proof needed to be lowered; procedures needed to be simplified; timelines needed to be expedited, not only for the peace of mind and financial security of the grieving, but for the maintenance of the French

³⁶Jacques Lecoq, "De La Constatacion Du Décès Des Disparus," 17.

³⁷Louis Nail, "Circulaire du Ministre de la Justice relative à l'application de la loi du 25 juin 1919 concernant les militaires, marins ou civils, disparus durant la guerre."

government's authority over a war that had produced losses on an unexpected, inhuman scale. The laws and ordinances that passed during and after the war were considerably more lenient on the question of proving death in absence. Even eyewitness accounts were not necessary in some desperate situations. This was inevitable, or even desirable. As Lecoq writes,

These [earlier] laws were insufficient for the atrocious war we suffered, in which science was put in service to the spirit of both destruction and defense. To establish death by witnesses, when sections, entire companies were destroyed by mines, was impossible, all witnesses having inevitably disappeared.³⁸

The body of law eventually established to address the disappearance of soldiers consisted mainly of the law of 3 December 1915³⁹, which applied articles 89 through 92 of the civil code to those killed during the war, and the law of 25 June 1919.⁴⁰ Various, these laws established bureaucratic procedures for determining absent men legally dead, described different requirements for eyewitness testimony of death, addressed sailors lost at sea and created a catch-all safety net for men whose deaths could not, through any known means, be proven or attested to with certainty.

The wives or other "interested parties"⁴¹ of those killed in front of witnesses, or whose deaths were otherwise generally verifiable, could demand an *acte de décès* from the relevant ministry outlined by the 1915 law, either the Ministère de la guerre for soldiers, Ministère de la marine for sailors, or Ministère de l'intérieure for

³⁸Jacques Lecoq, "De La Constataion Du Décès Des Disparus," 29-30.

³⁹"La loi du 3 décembre 1915, relative aux actes de décès des personnes présumées victimes d'opérations de guerre."

⁴⁰"La loi du 25 juin 1919, relative aux militaires, marins et civils disparus pendant la durée des hostilités."

⁴¹Including general prosecutors.

“all other persons.” The typical procedure consisted of up to a year-long administrative investigation conducted by local tribunes within the proper ministry, punctuated with three important updates to the legal status of a missing person: a “Presumption of absence,” followed by a “Declaration of absence,” and finally a “Definitive conclusion of possession”⁴². By this point, an *acte de décès* was available for the use of widows to claim pensions, remarry, or otherwise attempt to improve their situation.

The *pis aller*⁴³ law of 25 June 1919 eventually became the ultimate solution for the problem of unidentified soldiers, though it was deeply imperfect. It represents a level of judicial absurdity that could only be explained by the pressure felt by legislators to address the many *disparus*, who could now be declared dead without any evidence. In fact, the lack of evidence of continued life, rather than any definitive evidence of death, was the basis for a determination of death. Minister of Justice Louis Nail confirms its necessity despite the effectiveness of the 1915 procedure in his speech before the new law’s application:

The law of 3 December 1915 rendered undeniable services, and it is to thank for more than 75,000 rendered judgments that definitively fixed the fate of so many missing servicemen and civilians. But the rigorous conditions to which it subjected the declaration of their deaths—conditions which caution imposed at the time that it was promulgated—are not necessary today. Following the reentry of captive civilian populations and the return of our prisoners to France, unfortunately no doubt can remain of the reality of the deaths of the majority of those who are at present reported missing.⁴⁴

⁴²An *envoi en possession définitif* was a legal authorization “after judgment” to take the possessions and property from a deceased or absent person.

⁴³Colloquially, “last resort”.

⁴⁴Louis Nail, “Circulaire du Ministre de la Justice relative à l’application de la loi du 25 juin 1919 concernant les militaires, marins ou civils, disparus durant la guerre.”

With numbers of returning prisoners rising after the war's close, the unfortunate truth some families had been denying—that their husbands, sons and fathers were, with increasing likelihood, long dead—was incontrovertible, and now legally verifiable.

Tribunals organized for the purpose could “pronounce a declarative judgment of death if two years had passed since a disappearance caused by an act of war.”⁴⁵ This judgment indicates in all cases the presumed date of death and cannot be given before the 24th of April 1924.”⁴⁶ The date of death was typically determined by the last recorded position of the missing, or the date of last news received, unless an obvious military action had occurred near the time of disappearance that would account for the death. Lecoq eloquently notes how this *pis aller* solution filled the gaps in eyewitness-testimony laws:

How can you certify the death of he who was left behind, during a retreat in the midst of enemy lines; of he who, sent on a mission, never returned? Was he alive, imprisoned, deserting, or incapable of reporting his status? Was he killed? Following the absence of any news for a long enough period of time, it fell to the legislator to presume his status.⁴⁷

It seems that even among the unlucky *morts inconnus*, there were distinctions of misfortune; those whose deaths could be attested to by at least two eyewitnesses might be declared dead within a matter of months after the 1915 law passed, while the truly anonymous dead were to remain unconsidered before April 1924, even after the two-year grace period in which their survival was deemed possible. In the

⁴⁵An “act of war” was liberally interpreted to include any accident or injury stemming from the war, not only direct enemy actions.

⁴⁶Jacques Lecoq, “De La Constataion Du Décès Des Disparus,” 27.

⁴⁷Jacques Lecoq, “De La Constataion Du Décès Des Disparus,” 27.

likely situation that the man under consideration was truly dead, the insufficiency of the law was obvious. Hypothetically, a man deployed to the front at the beginning of the war in early August 1914, who had died only weeks later, might not be declared dead for a decade—a decade in which his wife and children might fall destitute, or starve.

These shortcomings were acceptable in face of the awful losses suffered by the nation, and considering the debts owed by the *patrie* to its disappeared sons. The unusual 1919 law lacked precedent—the highly un-legal solution of declaring an absent man to be dead with no evidence or positive testimony shows the desperation of the government to provide closure to the open-ended questions posed by the *disparus*. In fact, legislators considered it a civic and moral necessity to end the purgatory of these men, to provide for their families and give their souls rest. At the introduction to the law, deputy parliamentarian Georges Leredu said:

We must defend the families of [the disappeared]: we must not forget them, who are unprotected and isolated in the wake of life, which will bury them with the burdens of imperious necessities and dominating appeals. Just as we cannot forget the tragic legion of errant spirits: we must invite them into the grand mausoleum, acknowledge their sacrifice for France in a time of war!⁴⁸

Lecoq, in a passionate expression of patriotism, further describes the 1919 law as a project to honor the sacrifices of the deceased for the *patrie*:

In its time, this indispensable law rendered the greatest service possible to families...to legally declare the likely facts and give tribunes the power to judicially resolve a situation of fact in ways that ordinary laws of peacetime wouldn't allow. It allowed the disappeared soldiers to be acknowledged as having fallen on the field of honor, facing the enemy; those who spilled their blood in obscurity, with no

⁴⁸Jacques Lecoq, "De La Constataion Du Décès Des Disparus," 121.

other witness than their comrades, victims of the same death. Their unknown heroism saved us all!⁴⁹

The law was necessary to speed grieving and rebuilding, and to shut the investigative case files kept open by the military, government, and auxiliary bodies on the missing. However, even with its built-in delay of up to ten years, the law still produced some unfortunate situations in which men declared dead miraculously reappeared, living, their effects and equity sold, their wives remarried. These instances, though rare, demonstrate the extreme level of uncertainty families of *disparus* suffered, even after their lives had progressed considerably beyond the war. Though most “reappearances” were assumed to be innocent and tragic mistakes, the result of lapses in communication, grievous injury, or foreign imprisonment, there some cases in which living *disparus* were simply deserters avoiding the death penalty, or men avoiding financial and familial obligations. Lecoq references a case examined by the Parquet de la Seine⁵⁰ in which a deserter fled the front for the interior, and despite being presumed dead was found to be “still well alive,” with his death certificate *en poche*.⁵¹

Equally, families and other interested parties might have ulterior motives for declaring an absent man definitively dead. Lecoq notes one case in which a man sought to have a neighbor declared dead *in absentia* so that he could collect a debt of only 80 or 100 francs from the *disparu's* estate.⁵² Tactfully, he also approaches the question of presuming a date of death when the legitimacy of young children is at

⁴⁹Jacques Lecoq, “De La Constatacion Du Décès Des Disparus,” 163

⁵⁰Public prosecutor’s office.

⁵¹Jacques Lecoq, “De La Constatacion Du Décès Des Disparus,” 88.

⁵²Jacques Lecoq, “De La Constatacion Du Décès Des Disparus,” 90.

stake. Motives and circumstances needed to be considered by tribunals determining death. The strangeness of litigating identity, life and death was in some ways banal, tempered by the usual weaknesses of human nature.

The tragic if colorful case of the “living unknown soldier,” demonstrates the futility in applying a rational legal system to a highly metaphysical and illogical problem. The man in question was a complete amnesiac. His strange history was published in 1935 as a ten-part series in the *l’Intransigeant* newspaper: he had been discovered “wandering the platforms of the Lyon-Brotteaux railway station” in 1918, and was shuttled through insane asylums until his death in 1942.⁵³ His photograph and the name he eventually uttered, interpreted as “Anthelme Mangin,” were circulated widely in 1922 by the Ministry of Pensions in newspapers and through veteran’s organizations calling for identifying information.

This provoked an unexpected absurdity: more than 300 inquiries were made, and eventually, 20 families sued in court claiming Mangin as their own, even after clearer photographs were sent and in-person meetings with the amnesiac were arranged.⁵⁴ Despite constant litigation, no positive claim or identification was made, and the “only truly free man,” died, as he had lived, anonymously. It is difficult to imagine how so many people could be properly convinced that the same man was their husband, father or son. While some of the claimants may have been motivated by greed or fame, others were certainly sincere. Mangin’s case demonstrates both the desperate delusions of grieving families and the extreme plasticity of soldiers’

⁵³Jean-Yves Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier: A Story of Grief and the Great War*, 1.

⁵⁴Jean-Yves Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier: A Story of Grief and the Great War*, 2.

identities. Akin to their comrades fallen unknown in the trenches, returning soldiers might be so physically or mentally mutilated that they were unrecognizable, even to those who knew them best. The functional difference between the living mutilated soldiers, and dead unknown soldiers, was often nonexistent, determined only by insufficient bureaucratic and legal processes.

Other accounts similar to Mangin's were widely publicized and discussed. Certainly, the fantasy that a soldier presumed missing for many years could return, thriving, if injured or amnesiac, was a powerful social narrative. The unlikelihood of this outcome did little to discourage families from believing or hoping that their soldiers would return to them. In fact, the *Bulletin de l'Union des Familles des Disparus*, a circular published by the organization of the same name, encouraged families even in March 1918 to remain hopeful. The first issue relates a rare tale of reunion, titled "We should never lose hope" in which an army captain is revealed to be alive, if trepanned and imprisoned in Germany, years after having been declared dead:

Mademoiselle R..., in R., a dedicated member of our Association, had been, at the beginning of the war, officially notified of the death of her husband, Captain R... of the ... infantry regiment, 7th company, fallen at Courcy, at the location called the Cavaliers de Courcy, the 17th of September 1914.

The certificate of honor had been given to him but after multiple inquiries it was learned from an officer in charge of questioning repatriated soldiers that a captain named R... of the ... infantry regiment, with a grave head injury, had been trepanned, and afterwards had been taken to a camp in Germany of which the name is unfortunately not known.

The Germans prevented this captain from corresponding with his family for 40 months, but just in the last few days, Mme R... received confirmation from the King of Spain that her husband is indeed held prisoner in Germany and will soon be interned in Switzerland.

This news, which we are pleased to communicate, might give hope to families; it seems possible that a good number more of our *disparus* considered deceased are in fact prisoners of war, whom the Germans, in a refinement of cruelty, have prevented from writing to their relatives.⁵⁵

The spectacular details of this story reveal its particularity; the missing soldier was of high rank, and his case therefore merited “multiple inquiries” and the involvement of the “King of Spain,” or more likely, a deputy or aide within his court. The common enlisted man gone missing did not receive this kind of attention, rendering the article’s closing encouraging relatives to maintain hope in absence of information perhaps naïve. However, stories like the above show why similar *gazettes* may have grown in circulation and popularity. Death was a bureaucratic state in post-war France, not a physical one, and resurrection could be as simple a matter as receiving hopeful correspondence or voiding a form.

It became common for wives or families to send a description or photograph of the *disparu* with his regiment and last known location to a newspaper or *gazette*. These circulars were widely published even long after the war. Without news or hope, relatives of the *disparus* who were unable to accept the likelihood of death avidly searched for information and closure by conducting correspondence and sending inquiries throughout France and allied countries.

⁵⁵“Il ne faut jamais désespérer,” *Bulletin de l’Union des Familles des Disparus*, (March 1918), 9.

Chapter III

Filling the “terrible lacuna”: the search for information and remains

Wives, heirs and *tiers* of missing soldiers might try to continue their lives, by remarrying, mourning, and forgiving debts. Most likely, they would have had the missing declared dead *in absentia* to facilitate this process. However, driven by grief, faith, delusion, or perhaps fabulous stories of soldiers returning years after their disappearances, some desperately searched for information or proof that the missing were still alive. Frustrated by incomplete, delayed military and government news of refugees and prisoners of war, citizens began organizing into *associations*, founded by churches, medical aid organizations, or government agencies, that published gazette newspapers and conducted correspondence and research regarding the whereabouts of missing soldiers.⁵⁶

The Association Française pour la Recherche des Disparus was one of the major *associations* active during and after the war, and published the gazette *La Recherche des Disparus* with the collaboration of the Agence des Prisonniers de Guerre of the Croix-Rouge Française. The first issue of *La Recherche*, printed on February 28th 1915, advertises in its masthead that it contains names of “Soldiers searched for at the request of their families, because they are not included in any official list of Prisoners of War.”⁵⁷ Because these official lists were often kept

⁵⁶Churches and religious organizations had a particular interest in the identification and repatriation of the remains of the *disparus*; the dead could not be buried with Christian rites if they were unidentified. Thus the passion of clergymen like Abbé Alphonse Collé, who, in his village in the Rhône-Alpes, would routinely exhume bodies of unidentified soldiers and sketch their more recognizable features to aid in identification. A collection of the Abbé’s sketches and war journals is currently being exhibited at the Médiathèque de Barcelonnette in France.

⁵⁷*La Recherche des Disparus* (28 February 1915), 1.

classified, *associations* endeavored to craft lists of their own, gathering information from soldiers, families and foreign governments whenever possible.

This first issue describes in detail how information on missing soldiers was gathered. The Croix-Rouge first presents the “official” organ of intel regarding *disparus*: the Bureau des Renseignements du Ministère de Guerre, or the Bureau of Intelligence of the Ministry of War. This organization claimed “sovereign authority” over all intelligence concerning “wounded, ill, captive, dead or missing soldiers.”⁵⁸ More than one million cases were already under consideration by the Bureau in 1915, and 500 petty bureaucrats were pressed into service under “competent, active and devoted” bosses to wade through information coming in daily from the military, French families, and foreign governments.⁵⁹

Reassurances are made as to the completeness of military recordkeeping, which was certainly not quite so diligent if the testimony of soldiers like Louis Barthas is to be believed. Each hospitalized soldier was supposedly on a list of patients sent to the Bureau every five days. Every prisoner of war was somehow accounted for on lists provided by Germany to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the missing were listed and filed safely along with the dead, “the basis for future researches.”⁶⁰ After a correctly colored *fiche* was created for each soldier, the Bureau was to send relevant information and inquiries to all 1200 corps offices.⁶¹ At

⁵⁸“Bureau de Renseignements du Ministère de Guerre,” *La Recherche des Disparus* (28 February 1915), 1.

⁵⁹“Bureau de Renseignements du Ministère de Guerre,” *La Recherche des Disparus* (28 February 1915), 2.

⁶⁰“Bureau de Renseignements du Ministère de Guerre,” *La Recherche des Disparus* (28 February 1915), 2.

⁶¹An interesting bureaucratic tidbit: hospitalized soldiers’ records were kept on white paper, imprisoned soldiers’ records on violet, and missing soldiers’ records on green.

this time, the contacts listed for the soldiers in question were informed of the status of inquiries. Thus the Bureau des Renseignements was the “first source” for relatives to consult when the status of a soldier was uncertain. This vision of military and governmental control over the chaotic flow of information among enemy countries was certainly delusional, if not completely laughable.⁶²

Aware of the unlikelihood that 500 overworked bureaucrats could make a significant dent in the million cases before them by February 1915, the Croix-Rouge presents its gazette as supplementary resource. Despite its deference to the official government agencies, the Croix-Rouge’s intelligence-gathering structure was equally as complex, and perhaps more nimble:

Read here how the Croix-Rouge information service functions:
Each belligerent government sends the list of detainees of each internment camp to its national Red Cross.

This list is transmitted by an intermediary, the International Committee of the Red Cross of Geneva, to the adverse government...the national source for intelligence on prisoners is the Agence Française, 63 avenue des Champs-Élysées, Paris.

A double circulation is performed on the subject of prisoners: the first, by diplomatic pouch, is sent to the Ministry of War; the second, by way of the Croix-Rouge, is sent to the Agence Française des Prisonniers de Guerre which responds directly to inquiries addressed by families.⁶³

The journal was provided at no charge to the Prefectures and Sub-Prefectures of France, to the regiment offices, to Sanitation Schools, and Bureaus and Committees of French and foreign refugees. It was sold in train stations in the country’s major cities. The bulk of the journal is dedicated to pages of neat, closely typeset names,

⁶²Christian *associations* explicitly complained about faulty information, citing “false clues found in misleading information from German organizations,” and other instances of bad faith, and even considered these actions a type of “psychological weapon.” Jean-Yves Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier: A Story of Grief and the Great War*, 57.

⁶³“Agence des Prisonniers de guerre de la Croix-Rouge Française,” *La Recherche des Disparus* (28 February 1915), 2.

approximately 300 in the first issue. The list includes men of all ranks and ages, listing their regiments and dates of last known location. This publication flooded French society. It was disseminated widely so as to have the greatest chance of reaching anyone with both the patience to read it and access to useful information.

Associations ran such gazette newspapers as interactive projects with the public:

Our union is entirely dependent on the active collaboration of its members...It is indispensable to arrive at the hoped-for results that the families themselves bring the documents, make inquiries, establish evidence, and discover the truth. Our union has been and must be even more a work of solidarity among suffering families.⁶⁴

Beyond patiently waiting and praying for news, families were expected to actively pursue leads, not only inquiring at regiment offices, but at local government outposts, in newspaper ads, and through private correspondence.⁶⁵ To aid families in their own research, the Croix-Rouge published organized lists of repatriated soldiers and civil refugees, “grands blessés” brought to France from foreign hospitals, and incomplete but invaluable lists of French prisoners in German camps, in addition to advertisements listing the missing. These lists were so important to independent researches that *La Recherche* began to sell them separately from the gazette, at costs of 45-50 centimes per list, the price going down as the list got older.

Where the law encouraged citizens to accept the likely probability of soldiers’ deaths, putting a neat bureaucratic close to their lives, *associations* presented other explanations for lack of news, like interruptions in domestic mail

⁶⁴“Notre Bulletin,” *Bulletin de l’Union des Familles de Disparus* (March 1918), 1.

⁶⁵The powerful myth of the returning soldier, and of desperate investigation by families, is dramatized in the 1991 novel by Sebastien Japrisot, and the subsequent 2004 film of the same name, *A Very Long Engagement* (*Un Long Dimanche de Fiançailles*).

service, foreign imprisonment under inhumane conditions, or long hospitalization and amnesia. They encouraged families to seek a final closure; to find the evidence, whether informational or physical, of the truth. Gazette newspapers certainly served some who were eventually happily reunited with their husbands, sons or fathers, but they also provided a means of extending futile hope for the majority, who would never see the *disparus* again. Both the *Bulletin* of the *Union des Familles des Disparus*, and *La Recherche des Disparus* of the Croix-Rouge make vague mentions of successful reunions. The *Bulletin* writes, “we know of numerous examples of the missing being recovered.”⁶⁶ *La Recherche* similarly comforts:

Thanks to the united efforts of the Ministries of War and of the Interior, thanks to the dedication of numerous private institutions, the number of *disparus* is today considerably diminished, and well-organized intelligence services are likely to inform families of the situations of their members who are victims of war.⁶⁷

There are no published statistics on how many men were discovered thanks to the efforts of *associations*. It is perhaps simply a measure of how difficult it was to keep accurate records during such a destructive war. However, considering that by the war’s end, more than 225,000 were estimated to remain missing, the grand proportion of investigations likely ended without finding definitive information.

Despite the growing lists of names in each successive gazette, families insisted on continuing their searches, putting forth greater and greater efforts as the years wore on. By January 1916, *La Recherche des Disparus* began including portraits of selected soldiers. The seven portraits on the cover of *La Recherche’s*

⁶⁶“Notre Bulletin,” *Bulletin de l’Union des Familles de Disparus*, 1.

⁶⁷“L’Association Française pour la Recherche des Disparus et les Oeuvres auxquelles elle se rattache,” *La Recherche des Disparus* (28 February 1915), 1.

January 16, 1916 issue are all of officers; perhaps they also had particularly influential or persistent families. Another change: at a cost of 1 franc per line, families could publish a short paragraph on the front page, just under the photographs.⁶⁸ Unlucky advertisers paying the same fee were relegated to the back cover.

These short descriptions provide little more information than the usual name and regiment listed for a fee of 1 franc 15 centimes; most offer simply a polite “prayer” begging for any news, and a direct address for contacting the family.⁶⁹ Unfortunately even for those willing to pay week after week for ads, perhaps running simultaneously in several gazettes, the deluge in requests proved too great for *associations* to handle; even with high sales, the papers were operating on tight margins due to the number of issues provided without cost to government and military outposts. A May 1915 issue apologizes:

To those requesting more insertions:

A certain number of families is frequently demanding new or repeated insertions of the names of their *Disparus*.

The abundance of demands and the advance preparation of issues of the Journal do not always permit us to immediately satisfy them. But this delay is not in any way contrary to their interests: as the receipt of demands and accordingly their insertion in the Journal are parallel, research is being undertaken by our exterior correspondents.⁷⁰

The multitude of cases and the complexity of the information channels, as well as the logistical foibles that must be expected of analog communication among enemy

⁶⁸In 1916, the fee for printing a longer *annonce* had actually been reduced from 2 francs per line, perhaps due to the increasing quantity of requests.

⁶⁹Typically, if information on a missing soldier was discovered, the informant would have to correspond with the gazette rather than the family. This extra-fee advertisement was meant to cut response time.

⁷⁰“Aux personnes demandant plusieurs insertions,” *La Recherche des Disparus* (30 May 1915), 15.

states in a time of war, make it unclear exactly how “exterior correspondents” were able to help desperate families. Internal records of Croix-Rouge investigators, which were meant to provide definitive information, sometimes were able to do little other than advise families of probable events, witnessed by compatriots of the missing, often interviewed years after the moment in question.

One investigator sought information about Victor Joseph Augustin Langlois, a soldier who had gone missing sometime around late September 1915. The interviewed witness testifies from his own imprisonment in a German camp in 1918:

Messieurs, I can confirm for you that he named Langlois, Victor was a soldier in my section. The 27th of September 1915, he was very gravely injured about the head by a grenade, and he no doubt succumbed later to his injuries on the Plateau of Bolante. I cannot relate more of his status as I left a moment just after the incident. It was probably 3:00 in the afternoon. For other details you can interrogate my comrade who was with me, whose name I have provided. Votre dévoué,
MORET Emile, Soldat
91^{me} d'Inf. 1^{ere} comp.⁷¹

Moret is largely sure that his comrade Langlois died; he was able to provide concrete details with certainty, as well as the name of a second witness. This information certainly did little to comfort Mme Langlois, to whom this interview was sent soon after it was conducted. However, she, unlike thousands of others, could be nearly certain of the fate of her husband.

Other investigations proved more inconclusive. Even when a witness had definitive knowledge of the last known whereabouts and condition of a comrade,

⁷¹Interview with Emile Moret, conducted by Kommandantur Kriegsgef of Giessen camp, 21 January 1918 (Témoignages de la grande guerre, Les Archives Historiques du CICR).

unless he was present and aware at the exact moment of death, nothing could be proven to satisfaction. A French soldier imprisoned in Germany's Doberitz camp relates:

The 24th of May, in the morning, I was taken prisoner, and next to me was BLAIS, Georges of my squadron buried up to his torso; when I regained consciousness I found myself in the same position as my comrade I wanted to speak to him but I received no response as he was dead I cannot affirm as I wasn't at that moment well in my own head at this time I was taken thus I don't know what became of my comrade.

Signed ARTIGUE⁷²

As was required, this agonizingly uncertain testimony was transmitted the 15th of June 1918 to a M. Blais in Bretteville-sur-Laize in Basse-Normandie, perhaps the missing soldier's father or brother. What further recourse could he turn to? Was there another comrade imprisoned somewhere, who came upon the remains or person of Georges Blais, evidently killed or perhaps living? Was this witness himself killed? The anxiety of not knowing suffered by countless relatives and friends of the missing was increased when *La Recherche des Disparus* was abruptly put out of circulation in 1917:

We announce with profound regret to our loyal readers and subscribers that our monthly publication LA RECHERCHE DES DISPARUS will end with issue No. 73 of December.

Because of difficulties we constantly face due to the paper crisis and rising fees of all kinds, the Council of the Administration has decided to stop publishing.

Our research will not be interrupted and the intelligence we receive will continue to be transmitted to families with the greatest diligence.

We are at the disposal of our subscribers who can request the reimbursement of the sum of issues not yet delivered.⁷³

⁷²Interview with Charles Artigue by notary of Doberitz camp, 15 June 1918 (Témoignages de la grande guerre, Les Archives Historiques du CICR).

⁷³"Nous avons le profond regret," *La Recherche des Disparus* (15 December 1917), 1.

While the Croix-Rouge continued its research on behalf of missing soldiers and refugees, it was certainly a blow to hopeful families to lose this important resource, whereby any government bureaucrat or train station visitor might become the bearer of key information.⁷⁴

Historian Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau describes the anxiety and sufferings of families who, detached from the deaths of the *disparus* by lack of information or remains, tried to fill the “terrible lacuna”:

What were [the *disparus*] last moments, what were the exact circumstances of their deaths? What injuries? What sufferings? They also wanted to know if those who they grieved died alone, if they were buried, and if so, the location of the gravesite. It was an effort to fill the terrible lacuna of not being able to care for the dying, from his injury to his agony, from his agony to his death, from his death to his burial. This lacuna might only be a few hours, or in most cases a few days, but it appears to have tortured the survivors and made it difficult for them to grieve. And, sometimes, it made it impossible.⁷⁵

Disappearance interrupted normal processes of mourning and grief. Without the knowledge of their relatives’ last moments, or any remains to bury, families desperately sought answers, despite the difficulty or even futility of getting dependable information. Audoin-Rouzeau describes painful periods of waiting endured for weeks or months when relatives stopped receiving letters. After interminable days of wondering if this silence meant death, some families received a sort of half-closure: an official notice of death from the military. Like their counterparts still waiting for any news, such families would continue to investigate

⁷⁴It is difficult to determine how continued, or how extensive, Croix-Rouge researches were after this point. While some archival materials have been preserved and digitized in Geneva, many records are reported to have been destroyed during World War II or must be stored in repositories unknown.

⁷⁵Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, “Corps perdus, corps retrouvés: trois exemples de deuils de guerre,” (Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales 55.1, 2000), 48.

the specifics of their relatives' deaths, corresponding with comrades, the Croix-Rouge, or others. In the case that some satisfying details were discovered, there was still another, more important, search to be made: that for the remains of the missing. A lack of remains was an intolerable evidentiary caesura that called all certainty of death into question.

Audoin-Rouzeau assigns greater importance to the missing body than to the incompleteness of information about it. The lack of physical evidence, rather than the lack of minute-to-minute knowledge, is what truly disrupts grief. He writes:

That which the mourning wished for, above all else, were the *bodies* of the dead...In effect, besides the families of those injured who had the luck to be hospitalized and received visitors before their deaths, families were not able, in the immense majority of cases, to care for or help the dying in their agony. Most often, soldiers died alone...procedures of preparation for grief were thus eliminated, as were all ordinary rites to do with the first moments of loss.⁷⁶

An extraordinary emphasis on the importance of finding the body of the dead, and on knowing the exact nature of its physical injuries, is obvious in the diaries of grieving mother Jane Catulle-Mendès, whose youngest son Primice Mendès went missing in 1917 at the age of 20. Even after finally receiving a letter informing her of Primice's death from one of his comrades, Mme Catulle-Mendès felt an immense need to find his body. She writes of her disbelief in the absence of physical evidence that the "petit prince" of the family had truly died:

I could not understand that my son was dead...I saw him living. I saw all of his expressions, all his mannerisms, his habit of lowering his

⁷⁶Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Corps perdus, corps retrouvés: trois exemples de deuils de guerre," 47.

head a bit with a half-smile, of pressing his face up close to mine. I sense him, I hear him, he is present, he is near me...he is dead.⁷⁷

Catulle-Mendès searched for Primice's final resting place with the help of his comrade Étienne D., to close this gap in her understanding, and to properly grieve him. Primice was reported to have been buried, with greater ceremony than most, in a cemetery in the Black Forest, his name inscribed on a white cross.

However, Catulle-Mendès was aware that such cemeteries were often destroyed by bombardment, and she was tempted by the report that Primice had died of a bullet wound to the abdomen, "completely undisfigured...his face so calm that his comrades nearby didn't think anything had happened."⁷⁸ She had a chance to see her handsome son once more, and she was determined to take it:

I'm going. I know that I'm going. How can I leave my son dead under shellfire...how can I let the shells unearth him, damage him...when death has already spared him from that. Death has left me a task...I'm going to find him.⁷⁹

Catulle-Mendès did indeed find his body, repatriated and reinterred in Mourmelon-le-Grand, roughly 250 miles from his original gravesite in Germany. However, his body still wasn't far enough from the front to be safe. Catulle-Mendès had an oak casket made, large enough to encase the simple pine box Primice had been given by the Army. She attempted three times to have him exhumed, only to fail due to bombardments or the simple fact that Primice's grave couldn't be identified in the dark of night, when it was safe to enter the cemetery.

⁷⁷Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Corps perdus, corps retrouvées: trois exemples de deuils de guerre," 51.

⁷⁸Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Corps perdus, corps retrouvées: trois exemples de deuils de guerre," 50.

⁷⁹Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Corps perdus, corps retrouvées: trois exemples de deuils de guerre," 52-53.

Catulle-Mendès was finally reunited with her son the night of October 6, 1917.⁸⁰ His casket was dug up, and in the darkness, opened; Catulle-Mendès, overcome by a “mysterious” feeling, was unable to look upon her son’s face, fainting after glimpsing it through the pine slats. However, the soldiers acting as gravediggers assured her that his face was intact, the same as in life, if a bit pale, and that no odor issued from the remains. This reunion ended Catulle-Mendès’ agony:

He isn’t alone anymore...I am with him. He isn’t shut away in that awful shadow any longer...a bit of light is reaching him...a bit of free air is passing over him...the limestone of Champagne’s subsoil filled his casket, preserving his body.⁸¹

Catulle-Mendès, for all her struggles—she attempted suicide by car in Paris when the first attempts at disinterment failed—was one of the lucky ones. She was informed of her son’s death in a matter of weeks; his body was properly buried, its location known; she was able to retrieve him, and confirm his death; she had other living children besides. Most were not nearly as fortunate, never learning definitively of their husbands’ or sons’ deaths, or the manner of them, let alone being able to locate a body and reinter it, if it even existed intact. She is the exception, filling the hole left by Primice’s disappearance and death, just as the limestone filled his casket, preserving his memory and his mother’s sanity. For most, the lacuna gaped wide, a formidable shadowy maw that swallowed all certainty and security.

⁸⁰The entirety of Jane’s formidable story is worth reading, for its strangeness and for her immense perseverance. It is available in French in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau’s article *Bodies Lost, Bodies Found: Three Examples of Grieving After War*: http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/ahess_0395-2649_2000_num_55_1_279833.

⁸¹Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, “Corps perdus, corps retrouvées: trois exemples de deuils de guerre,” 56.

Swedish historian Eva Åhrén describes exactly the liminal space *disparus* inhabited:

During the time between the moment of death and burial, the dead body has an uncertain status. The deceased exist on a border between the world of the living, to which they recently belonged, and the world of the dead, to which they do not yet belong...Death disturbs the social order by tearing an individual from his or her context. The function of the rites of death and burial is thus to reestablish order and create meaning out of death.⁸²

The anxiety that Audoin-Rouzeau and Åhrén describe is of a purely psychological nature; mourners needed physical proof of the death, to provide closure, to create order from chaos. The denial of rites of death and burial to hundreds of thousands of families of the *disparus* introduced a damaging disorder into French society, and called the sacrifices of all into question. The grieving, as well as disillusioned *mutilés* and veterans of foreign imprisonment, could no longer support the fantasies of honor and patriotism that led so many Frenchmen into the dark of the trenches, never to return again.⁸³ The failure of the government and military to account for the *disparus* was an unforgivable one, betraying the insufficiency of the bureaucratic state in a time of total war, when its power and reach was relied upon the most.

⁸²Eva Åhrén, *Death, Modernity, and the Body: Sweden 1870-1940* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 4.

⁸³For her part, Jane Catulle-Mendès wrote regarding her son Primice, whom she allowed to go to war at 17: "It's my fault. Why did I speak so much to him of honor, of duty, of beauty? Why did I need him to have such an upright and lofty soul?" Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Corps perdus, corps retrouvées: trois exemples de deuils de guerre," 52.

Conclusion

The unknown soldier, identified

On May 14, 1998, the Unknown Soldier buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia to commemorate the Vietnam War was exhumed. Laid to rest with great ceremony in 1984, researchers later determined his probable identity: the remains were those of First Lieutenant Michael J. Bassie of the U.S. Air Force. A mitochondrial DNA test confirmed that the body of soldier X-26 had been buried prematurely. In the mid-1980s, DNA verification was considered to be the true end of uncertainty regarding identifications of unknown soldiers, even those buried many years previously. A *New York Times* article announcing the identification of Lt. Bassie speculates: "Although 2,087 Americans remain missing from Vietnam and unidentified remains have been gathered, the advances in genetic testing have made it highly unlikely that any set of remains can be called 'unknown' with absolute certainty."⁸⁴ In actual fact, 1,627 American soldiers who fought in Vietnam are still unidentified or MIA as of April 10th 2015.⁸⁵

The effort to identify Lt. Bassie was plagued by problems that reveal similar governmental anxieties to those felt by French officials during World War I. Writer Michael Sledge argues that paradoxically, the government's desire to provide closure for families of soldiers missing in action was actually the cause for Lt. Bassie's wrongful internment. Though badly decomposed by their retrieval 5

⁸⁴Steven Lee Myers, " 'Unknown' Vietnam Soldier Now Has A Name," (*New York Times*, 30 June 1998).

⁸⁵United States of America, Department of Defense, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, *Vietnam-Era Statistical Report* (2015).

months postmortem, his remains were accompanied by personal effects including his military ID and dog tags, unfortunately lost during repatriation. The evidence was convincing enough that the status “Believed To Be” (BTB) was affixed to his body, ensuring that his remains would be kept at the military’s Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, pending the development of more advanced procedures that could eliminate all doubt. In order for Lt. Bassie’s “unidentified” body to be interred in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, this BTB status needed to be annulled. An inconclusive anthropological examination determined that the femoral bones were perhaps too short to belong to a man of Bassie’s height. This was sufficient evidence to put a positive identification at risk. Thus the Unknown Soldier’s identity was almost purposefully obscured, until outside pressures forced an exhumation.⁸⁶

Sledge identifies the bureaucratic reasons for resisting efforts to identify soldier X-26: “First was the desire to maintain the sanctity of the tomb—not to disturb the remains. Second was the desire to satisfy the need for a full accounting when possible. Third, opening the tomb would, in effect, open Pandora’s box in that the government might be faced with requests for reinvestigation of other unknowns.”⁸⁷

A false sense of closure was better than no sense of closure, in the eyes of officials.

The U.S. Government’s attempt to telegraph mastery and control over the missing and unidentified echoes similar attempts made by the French during World War I. The agencies, laws, associations, and processes described in this thesis evolved as methods to project bureaucratic control over the metaphysical problem

⁸⁶Michael Sledge, *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury and Honor Our Military Fallen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 127-129.

⁸⁷Michael Sledge, *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury and Honor Our Military Fallen*, 128.

of death. Despite the best efforts of the French military, no *plaques d'identité* could be designed that would remain on the body in every case; no midnight disinterment crew could be trusted to pull every fallen soldier from the muck of the trenches. The government could devise no law that could account for all the *disparus*, and no investigative agency or gazette newspaper could unearth definitive evidence in every case. Beyond any organizational frustration, the roughly 225,000 *disparus* introduced an element of uncertainty into French society. Wives and parents awaiting news might wonder for years what had befallen their loved ones. Processes of grief and commemoration were interrupted as families had no remains to bury. The trauma of the war extended further for those who had no evidence, and therefore no peace of mind, concerning the last moments of the *disparus*.

Modern implications of identification anxiety

It is a measure of the intractability of the problem of unidentified remains that advanced genetic testing and contemporary investigative procedures are still, in some cases, inconclusive. With no referent, DNA tests are functionally useless. Attempts to retroactively identify commingled remains from World War I and World War II have largely failed for this reason. Additionally, retrieving DNA from such deteriorated samples is often impossible. That countries attempt to identify their fallen unknown, even 70 and 100 years after the fact, speaks to the powerful hovering anxiety produced by the unidentified dead. The nature of this unknown is urgent enough that government agencies continue to devote precious material and

human resources to seeking any evidence that somehow survived the intervening century.

The need to close these gaps in knowledge extends to the contemporary unknown dead. Victims of mass atrocity in Serbia, Croatia, and Rwanda, buried in common graves, are still being identified today, an effort of government coalitions, the UN, and Interpol. Similar graves containing commingled remains are under investigation in Iraq. Perhaps the anxiety experienced by French families after World War I regarding the last moments of the *disparus* is best mirrored, however, by events like the disappearance and presumed destruction of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 (MH370) on May 8th, 2014, during a flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. Though the search for the missing plane is heralded as the most extensive in aviation history, no debris or remains have been found to date. This disturbing fact has inspired both obsessive speculative timelines documenting each minute of MH370's flight, and wild theories attempting to explain how a Boeing 777 could disappear with no trace in spite of the technology employed onboard and in subsequent rescue efforts.⁸⁸ One year later, impassioned debate continues regarding the unknown fate of MH370, when public interest in similarly devastating events like the genocidal conflict in Syria has waned. Voice370, an advocacy group representing the families of the 239 passengers and crew, released a statement after

⁸⁸Aviation expert Clive Irving's theory explaining the disappearance is convincing, if horrific. He believes that the passengers and crew lost consciousness due to oxygen depletion, leading to a "zombie flight" that simply fell out of the sky when fuel was exhausted. This theory is only one of the various scenarios that have been forwarded and debated since MH370's disappearance. Clive Irving, "Flight 370 Did Not Disappear," (*The Daily Beast*, 8 March 2015).

Malaysia Airlines offered to pay \$50,000 in reparations to relatives of the presumed dead:

Despite [the] complete lack of wreckage found or physical evidence of a catastrophic event, the Malaysian government has officially declared that the airplane crashed, leaving no survivors, and it has ended the rescue phase of the search effort...We do not accept this finding and we will not give up hope until we have definitive proof of what happened to MH370.⁸⁹

A wider search, with new parameters, is planned to launch if no progress is made by May 2015. It is a virtual certainty that the 239 passengers and crew aboard MH370 died on May 8th, 2014, and that their remains deteriorated in the Indian Ocean soon after. However, like the those demanding insertions in *gazettes* a century earlier, the families of the missing MH370 victims refuse to give up hope that they will find evidence, and with it closure. The public's determined interest in this story reveals a similar need for evidence, a great discomfort with the state of not-knowing about the dead. The loss of MH370 destabilizes our assumptions about the infallibility of contemporary technology, which remains powerless against the obscure shadow of death.



The name and the object: dehumanization of the unidentified body

World War I was a bloody, viscerally violent conflict in which the introduction of modern technologies of destruction necessarily shifted the relationship between weapons and soldiers: a dislocation of the war from the bodies of those fighting it resulted. Dozens of men could be killed with one shell, or entire

⁸⁹"Where is Flight 370? One year after tragedy, officials no closer to finding answers," (*Foxnews.com*, Fox News, 8 March 2015).

neighborhoods razed by war planes. The fundamental wartime interaction of individual enemies was displaced. A soldier was as likely to be killed by the bullet of an anonymous *Boche* in the opposite trench as he was to be buried with his comrades by a rain of aerial bombardments.⁹⁰ The psychological effect of this new violence was great among survivors of the war, and even among those who did not fight. Traumatized soldiers returning from war, and *mutilés* bearing unfamiliar and grotesque injuries, struggled to reintegrate with their families after the armistice, even if staggered waves of demobilization gave *poilus* a buffer between war and peace. This demobilization process itself was another way in which the French government sought to impose mathematical logic on the wave of soldiers returning from the front. However, it was the soldiers who would not return from war who precluded all efforts to heal wound left by the war.

The banality of bureaucratic efforts to keep track of individuals in World War I interacts with abstract problems of identity and personhood. The very difficulty of pinning an identity—definitively—to the body disrupts any notion of control or systematic authority over masses of people. A primary project of government is to account for, and provide for, its citizens; if it fails at this basic function, all its higher efforts come into question. The various attempts to bridge the gap between the identity—*the name*—and the body—*the object*—failed miserably in the chaos of war, which destroyed any external signifiers of meaning that may have existed. For example, when a soldier is taken away from his family who knows him, and killed

⁹⁰This dislocation of violence is even more present in World War II, with the expansion of aerial attack strategies like blitzkrieg and the atomic bomb. Contemporary drone warfare represents perhaps a final evolution of dislocated conflict.

along with the rest of his squadron, the system of reciprocal meaning that placed his identity within a group of others is made useless. Individual identity is subsumed under the greater group of *disparus*, those who fell beyond the veil of knowledge.⁹¹ The tragedy of the *disparus* was not just that they were physically lost; they were also lost, irrevocably, to their families, even more so than the properly identified dead. French philosopher Jacques Derrida aptly describes the necessity of closing the gap between *the name* and *the object* if mourning is to occur. Naming is “the announcement of a death to come.” It is the “inescapable beginning of mourning...of a name that survives whoever carries that name.”⁹² The precondition of mourning a thing is being able to name what it was; the name survives the object, and gives its absence even the slightest meaning. A body without a name is dehumanized. It is an object with no meaning, rather than the sacred flesh that animated the soul of a loved one, now lost.

⁹¹Though soldiers were undoubtedly horrified at the idea of this individual annihilation, theorists since the war have romanticized collective death as a patriotic experience: “The citizen of the Republic existed as such through his individual and total implication in the collectivity. After death, he might live on as a name on a monument. His name would be visible up close, but as the onlooker’s field of vision retreated he would quickly and beautifully disappear into the collectivity...the many individuals, whose corporeal remains were strewn across the huge battlefield, became one in death.” Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldier’s Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 67.

⁹²Sean Gaston, *The Impossible Mourning of Jacques Derrida* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 8.

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Annex: Images

Figure: etched facsimile of design for *plaques d'identité*.

[Bureau de l'habillement. (1881). *Fac-simile de la plaque d'Identité*. (Journal militaire officiel, partie réglementaire, No. 44, p. 176). Librairie militaire.]

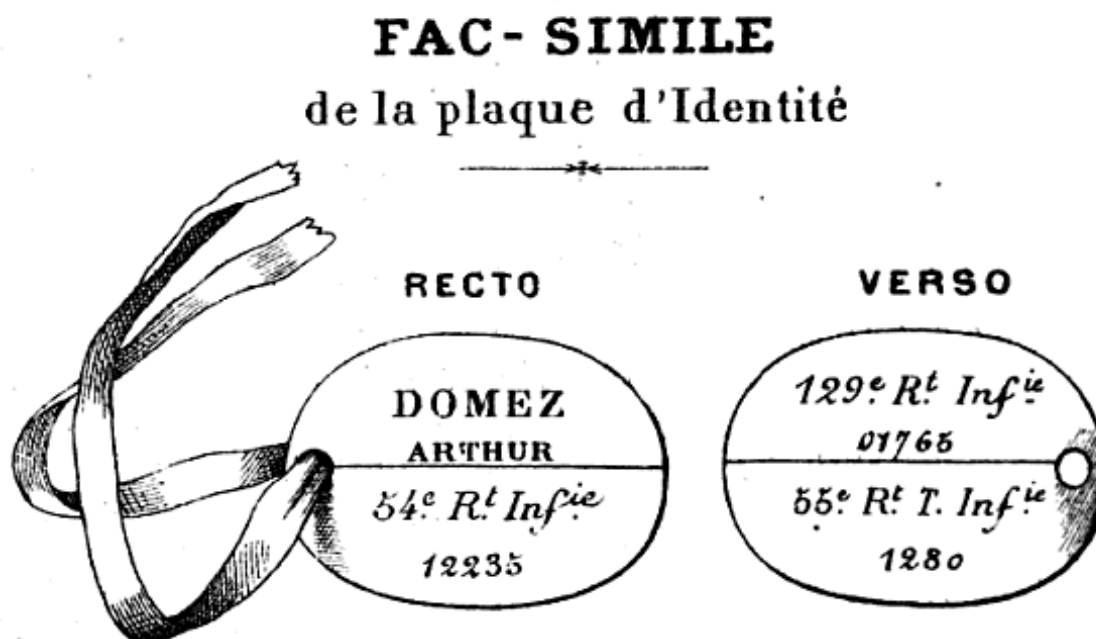


Figure: WWI-era *plaque d'identité* of soldier Jacques Boussac, recto and verso.

[*Médallion d'identification du soldat Jacques Boussac*. 1914-1918. Bibliothèque Numérique de Roubaix. *Patrimoine en Images*. Web. 15 April 2015.]



Figure: an etching describing ridged skin patterns on the sole of the foot, to aid in the identification of bodies.

[Wilder, Harris Hawthorne, Ph.D. and Brent Wentworth. *Personal Identification Methods for the Identification of Individuals, Living or Dead*. Boston : Richard G. Badger/The Gorham Press, 1918. 161.]

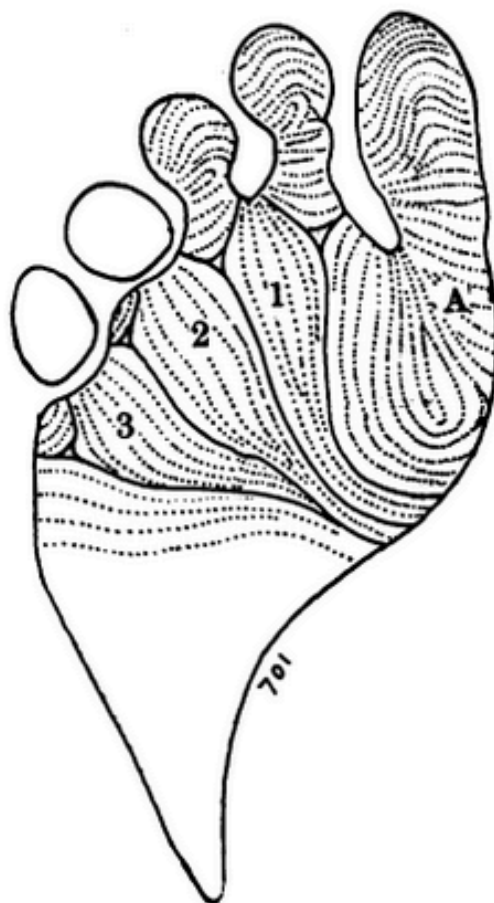


FIGURE 58. Tracing from a left-sole print. All the digital deltas are present, and the three plantar areas are easily and distinctly separated from one another. Formula: A 1.

Figure: *La Recherche des Disparus*, for the dates of January 16th-23rd, 1916. This is the first issue that included portraits of *disparus*.

[*La Recherche des Disparus* 16-23 January 1916: 1. Online.]

Journal Bi-Mensuel. — 15 cent. le Numéro Dimanches 16-23 Janvier 1916

LA RECHERCHE DES DISPARUS

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L'ASSOCIATION FRANÇAISE POUR LA RECHERCHE DES DISPARUS
et de
L'AGENCE DES PRISONNIERS DE GUERRE

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à la demande des familles, parce qu'ils ne figurent sur aucune liste officielle de Prisonniers de Guerre.

de la CROIX-ROUGE FRANÇAISE

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Portraits de nos Disparus

Tous les renseignements concernant les Disparus ci-dessous doivent être adressés au Directeur de la RECHERCHE DES DISPARUS, rue de Séze, à LYON.

						
J.-B. BERN , Capit. adj. maj., 7 ^e Tir. alg., 4 ^e bat., 30/31 août 1914, p. Rethel.	Georges BOVIER , adj., 10 ^e Inf., 10 ^e C ^e , 13 sept. 1914, Col de la Calotte — Han-de-Sapt.	Antoine FEY , capot., 13 ^e Chass. alp., 2 ^e C ^e , 3 sept. 1914, dans les Vosges.	Francis ARAUD , 17 ^e Inf., 10 ^e C ^e , 19 août 1914, Flachslanden.	Henri GRIER , Mar. Leg., 2 ^e Div., 2 ^e Esc., 2 nov. 1914, Zonnebeke (Belg.).	François KECK , 30 ^e Inf., 4 ^e C ^e , 26 oct. 1914, à Frise.	André PLANCHON , Caporal, 328 ^e Inf., 30 ^e C ^e , 31 oct. 1915, à ...

AUX GRANDS BLESSÉS RAPATRIÉS

Nous recommandons aux GRANDS BLESSÉS, MÉDECINS et INFIRMIERS rapatriés la lecture attentive de nos Petites Annonces et des Listes de Militaires recherchés ci-après. Nous les engageons également à réclamer et à consulter dans les hôpitaux où ils seront évacués, la collection complète du Journal « LA RECHERCHE DES DISPARUS » qui doit s'y trouver. Peut-être ont-ils connu ou soigné durant leur captivité les Disparus que nous recherchons, tant civils que militaires et pourront-ils fournir sur eux des renseignements intéressants. L'ASSOCIATION FRANÇAISE POUR LA RECHERCHE DES DISPARUS à LYON, rue de Séze, 2, les prie instamment de lui communiquer toutes les indications qui pourraient lui être utiles dans l'intérêt des familles.

Prochain retour de GRANDS BLESSÉS

On nous annonce qu'un échange de Grands Blessés aura lieu prochainement. La date de l'arrivée à Lyon n'est pas encore fixée.

Comme d'habitude, la Recherche des Disparus sera distribuée à la gare, et nous publierons dans notre supplément la liste des derniers Rapatriés comme nous l'avons fait pour ceux de septembre et décembre.

PETITES ANNONCES
1 fr. la ligne

Prière à toute personne pouvant donner des renseignements sur l'adjudant René BRUILLON, de la 3^e C^e du 160^e d'Inf., disparu le 16 nov. 1914, au combat de Woormezeele (près St-Eloi), d'écrire à Mme BRUILLON, à Brousséval (Hte-Marne). Tous frais remboursés.

Prière don. nouv. de Georges JUIL-LARD, 48^e Inf., 2^e C^e, disparu le 29 août 1914, à Proyard. Informer M. JUIL-LARD, 32, rue Ville-Dieu, Valenciennes (D. du N.).

Prière à soldats ou blessés rapatriés donner nouvelles de LASGRE-ZAS, 1^{er} Rég. Mixte Zouav. et Tirail., 54^e C^e. Ecrire LASGREZAS, à Tourtoire (Dordogne).

Demandons nouv. Paul WALTER, brig. 45^e Art., 101^e Batt., disparu le 13 juill. 15, au Bois-Bolante (Argonne). Ecrire WALTER, 78, rue Abbé-Groult, Paris.

Prière instante donner nouv. du capot. SEGUIN Robert, 6^e Inf., 12^e C^e, Matr. 8.356, disparu 27 sept. 15, devant ... Ecrire Seguin, 60, rue Charles-Lafitte, Neuilly (Seine). Frais remboursés.

Corps expéditionnaire d'Orient

Prière donner nouvelles de Marius DEPAY, du 175^e Inf., 6^e C^e, disparu du 3 au 10 Juin 1915, à Sedul-Bahr (Dardanelles), à M. Théodule DEPAY, maître-maçon, à Grandris (Rhône).

ARMÉE ANGLAISE

Disparu blessé, 9 mai 1915, rue du Bois-Ric: eboung - l'Avoué, lieutenant. R. H. POWELL (armée anglaise). Prière de communiquer toutes nouvelles à Mme POWELL, Burwood Rotterdam, Sussex (Angleterre).

(à suivre page 8)

Figure: a sketch by Jane Catulle-Mendès of her son Primice, who was killed in 1917 at the age of 20.

[*La Prière sur l'Enfant mort*. 1921. Crid 14-18. *Témoignages de 1914-1918*. Web. 15 April 2015.]

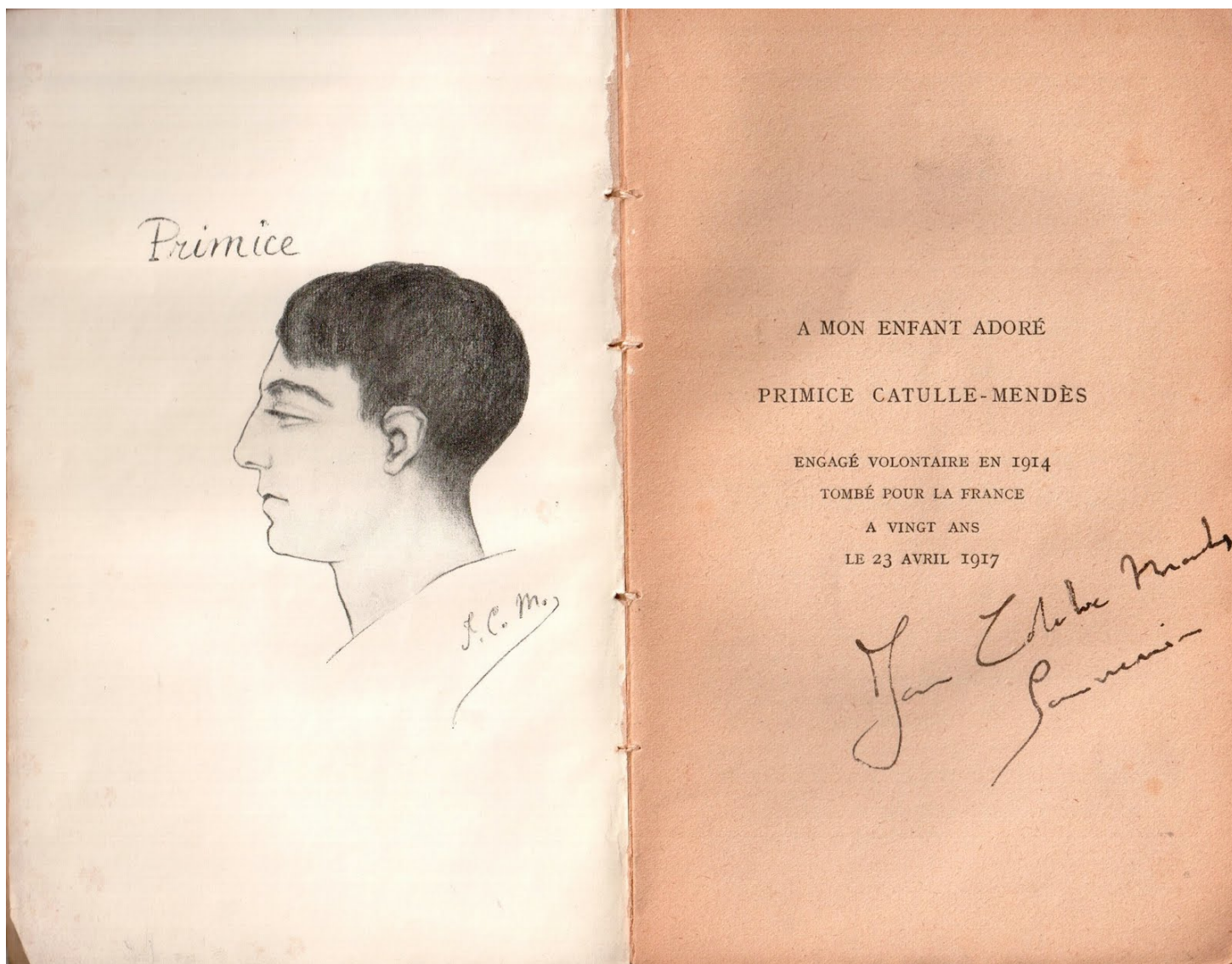


Figure : Pension application for wives and orphans of the war dead, first page.
 [France. Ministère De La Guerre. Service Général Des Pensions. *Pensions Des Veuves Et Orphelins De Militaires Décédés à La Guerre*. Paris: Patrimoine En Images.
 Bibliothèque Numérique De Roubaix. Web. 4 Mar. 2015.]

MINISTÈRE DE LA GUERRE
SERVICE GÉNÉRAL DES PENSIONS

Paris, Rue Bellechasse, N° 37 (VIIème Arrondissement)

Pensions des Veuves et Orphelins de Militaires Décédés à la Guerre

I. — Les veuves et les orphelins représentés par leurs tuteurs, des militaires décédés des suites de la guerre ont le plus grand intérêt à constituer immédiatement leurs dossiers de pension et à les déposer, avec la demande de pension, à la Sous-Intendance du Chef lieu de leur département, sans attendre la fin des hostilités.

II. — La constitution et le dépôt du dossier de pension n'empêchent nullement la veuve ou le tuteur de percevoir JUSQU'À LA FIN DES HOSTILITÉS, selon le cas, soit la délégation de la demi-solde du père ou du mari (décret du 9 Octobre 1914), soit l'allocation journalière de 1 fr. 25 majorée, s'il y lieu de 0 fr. 50 par enfant à leur charge, prévue par la loi du 5 Août 1914.

La faculté d'opter entre la délégation ou l'allocation et la perception immédiate des arrérages de la pension leur reste d'ailleurs toujours ouverte.

III. — L'accomplissement des formalités de dépôt du dossier a le grand avantage de permettre d'accélérer la liquidation et la concession de la pension, dont le titre pourra être remis à l'intéressé dès la cessation des hostilités, c'est-à-dire au moment même où la délégation de solde ou l'allocation (qui ne se cumulent pas avec la pension) cessera de lui être payé.

Tout retard dans le dépôt de la demande, accompagné du dossier, exposerait les veuves et les orphelins à ne pouvoir obtenir, qu'après un assez long délai, la liquidation de la pension et la remise du titre destiné à la perception des arrérages.

Il s'écroulerait, par suite, forcément plusieurs mois pendant lesquels ils ne pourraient rien percevoir.

PIÈCES À FOURNIR ET FORMALITÉS À REMPLIR PAR LES INTERESSÉS.

Les veuves et les tuteurs des orphelins doivent faire parvenir leurs demandes de pension ou de secours annuel d'orphelins soit au Sous-Intendant militaire de leur résidence, soit au Ministère de la Guerre, Service Général des Pensions (Rue de Bellechasse N° 37 à Paris VII^e Arr. en produisant les pièces suivantes qui peuvent être établies sur papier non timbré et sans frais.

a) POUR LES VEUVES.

1° — Demande de pension adressée au Ministre de la Guerre, légalisée par le Maire de la Commune ou de l'Arrondissement, si le domicile est à Paris.

2° — Acte de naissance de la veuve *légalisé*. Ces pièces doivent être dûment légalisées, si elles ne sont pas délivrées dans

3° — Acte de mariage *légalisé* (le département de la Seine.

4° — Acte de décès du mari. (1)

5° — L'état des services du mari qui doit être réclamé au Dépôt du régiment de celui-ci (1)
 6° — Certificat délivré par l'Autorité Municipale sur la déclaration signée de l'intéressée et de deux témoins constatant: qu'il n'y a eu entre les époux ni divorce, ni séparation de corps; que la veuve jouit de ses droits civils; qu'il n'existe pas d'enfant mineur issu d'un précédent mariage. (En cas de séparation de corps prononcée en faveur de la femme, produire un extrait du jugement).

7° — Certificat de genre de mort qui doit être demandé au dépôt du régiment du mari et peut être porté sur l'état des Services (1) Ce certificat peut être remplacé par l'avis du décès adressé par le Maire ou par l'Autorité militaire, si cette pièce porte la mention " Tué à l'ennemi ou Décédé des suites de blessures de Guerre.)

*Actes
naissances
des enfants
légalisés*

Figure : Pension application for wives and orphans of the war dead, second page.

En ce qui concerne plus particulièrement les veuves évacuées des régions envahies et qui ne peuvent, par suite, produire leur acte de naissance ou leur acte de mariage, les observations suivantes sont à retenir par les intéressées, pour leur permettre de suppléer aux deux actes qui leur manquent.

1^o— ACTE DE NAISSANCE. — A remplacer, s'il est possible, par une attestation signée de quatre habitants majeurs évacués de la commune que l'intéressée. Cette pièce devra être légalisée par le Maire de la Commune où réside actuellement l'intéressée. A Paris par le Maire de l'Arrondissement.

A défaut, produire un acte de notoriété délivré dans les conditions fixées par les articles 70 et suivants du Code Civil. Cette seconde solution, en raison des frais qu'elle entraîne, n'est à adopter que s'il est absolument impossible de se procurer l'attestation, dont il est question ci-dessus.

L'attestation ou l'acte de notoriété n'est exigé des veuves que si elles ne peuvent produire un acte de mariage, un livret militaire du mari ou un livret de mariage indiquant la date et le lieu de leur naissance.

2^o— ACTE DE MARIAGE. — A remplacer par tout acte officiel ou authentique établissant l'existence du mariage — Livret de mariage, livret militaire ou Etat des Services du mari portant mention du mariage, acte de naissance portant mention du mariage, acte notarié indiquant que telle personne a justifié de son mariage avec le militaire décédé.

b) POUR LES ORPHELINS

1^o— Demande de secours annuel adressée au Ministre de la Guerre par le Tuteur ou par l'orphelin émancipé et légalisé par le Maire de la Commune ou de l'arrondissement si le domicile est à Paris. Lorsque les circonstances s'opposent à la réunion immédiate du Conseil de famille appelé à désigner le tuteur, les personnes ayant charge d'un orphelin de la Guerre peuvent demander le secours annuel au nom de l'orphelin sous la réserve de s'engager par écrit à provoquer aussitôt que possible la nomination d'un tuteur et de donner avis de cette nomination au Ministre de la Guerre (Bureau des Pensions).

2^o— Acte de naissance des Orphelins

3^o— Certificat de vie des Orphelins

4^o— Acte de mariage des parents

5^o— Acte de décès du père (1)

6^o— Acte de décès de la mère.

7^o— L'Etat des Services du père qui doit être réclamé au Dépôt du Régiment de celui-ci (1)

8^o— Certificat délivré par l'Autorité Municipale sur l'attestation de deux témoins constatant qu'il n'existe pas d'autres orphelins mineurs du défunt.

9^o— Extrait de la délibération du conseil de famille réuni pour la nomination du tuteur ou pour l'émancipation de l'orphelin.

10^o— Certificat du genre de mort, qui doit être demandé au Dépôt du régiment du mari et peut être porté sur l'Etat des Services ci-dessus. (1)

En cas de divorce ou en cas de séparation de corps prononcée au profit du mari, les enfants sont considérés comme des orphelins, au point de vue de la Concession du secours annuel.

Ces pièces doivent être légalisées, si elles ne sont pas délivrées dans le département de la Seine.

(1) Si la Veuve ou le Tuteur des Orphelins ne peuvent se procurer ces pièces, ils enverront néanmoins leurs dossiers en mentionnant expressément qu'ils n'ont pu obtenir les pièces dont il s'agit.

NOTA

Aux termes de la Loi du 16 Mars 1916, il peut être suppléé à tous les actes de l'Etat Civil dont les originaux se trouvent en territoire occupé par l'ennemi, par des Actes de notoriété dressés sans frais par le Juge de Paix, sur la déclaration de trois témoins qui ont été domiciliés ou ont eu leur dernière résidence dans le département ou l'original de ces actes est déposé.